

Overdressed:  
Barthes, Darwin and the Clothes that Speak

By the same author

*Fashion Classics from Carlyle to Barthes* (2003)

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Barthes, Darwin and the  
Clothes that Speak

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## Preface

In a beautiful passage the anthropologist T. S. Turner gives an account of the feathered headdresses of the Kayapo people of Brazil. His unashamed daring to speak in a way that matches the metaphysical journey taken by the headdresses, known as birds, elevates this passage far above bland analysis.

Birds fly, and ‘can scan’ the whole world. They are not confined by its divisions, but transcend them in a way that to the Kayapo seems the supreme natural metaphor for the direct experience of the totality, the integration of the self through the perception of the wholeness, the transcendental integration of what ordinary human (that is social) life separates and puts at odds, is the essence of the Kayapo notion of beauty. (1)

I am not a scientist, let alone an evolutionary biologist. I am a student of human dress and what I have written is a response, part critical, part speculative, to a number of questions concerning the foundations of human appearance. That it chooses to do this while drawing on the theory of evolution does not mean that it needs to take the form of a scientific paper. Darwin and Darwinism have never been the sole possession of science and ever since the publication of *On the Origin of Species* in 1859 the theory of natural selection has touched areas far removed from biology. Besides, a scientific paper carries almost as many conventions as do haiku and to participate in scientific discourse means stripping away all those elements that are thought to impede the attainment of truth. There is an assumption, which is wholly imaginary, that the closer one approaches the condition of quality-free measurements then the closer one is to truth.

There is one absence in this work that needs to be acknowledged and that is the lack of any mention of Thorstein Veblen and his classic work, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. There is no doubt that Veblen would, under normal operating conditions, have been central to sorting out, and making sense of, the many meanings that cluster around the notion of ornament. I have nothing but admiration for the way in which he deflates

the world of the leisure class and exposes the pretensions of their way of life. Over a hundred years later his explorations of pecuniary culture are amongst some of the finest examples of social satire and his darts are still painful reminders of the pomposity we all share. But it was the fact that his favoured path was satire that put him out of bounds for the task here. Satire and its companions are worldly genres, intent on exposing the lofty ideals of their targets and so bringing them back to earth. But it was precisely this satirical grounding that I wanted to put to one side. It was necessary to open the intellectual skylights so that the aspirations, forms and structures of the 'useless' (read dress) could soar past the *secular* limits implicit in thinkers like Veblen. When the world was put to rights, argued Veblen, that is when its irrational organization was turned the right way up, then the non-utilitarian would vanish in favour of a wholly rational, utilitarian way of life. This is something I could not go along with.

The forswearing of the satirical has two consequences. The first is an absence of humour. The places we will be heading into are not noted for their levity, which is not to say that it is not in there somewhere, it's just that I haven't found it yet. In addition to this was a feeling that one should be wary of translating the aims and forms of the non-utilitarian into a worldly, secular vocabulary as if the latter was always the master key capable of unlocking the former. If one follows this pathway dress will ultimately fall back into the worldly cycle of class struggles, social reciprocity and obligation. There are dimensions to life beyond that of the strictly social and dress has always been caught up in some of the most profound longings of the human heart.

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(1) T.S. Turner, 'The Social Skin', in J. Cherfas and R. Lewin, *Not Work Alone: a Cross-Cultural View of Activities Surplus to Survival*, 1980, p. 131.



## Barthes and Dress

The question 'Are clothes useful?' doesn't get asked much these days. Perhaps this is because the answer appears to us as self-evident or maybe usefulness is a handy alibi, obscuring other, more elusive dimensions of our clothing. Who could argue against the utilitarian value of raincoats or underpants? So it may come as a surprise to learn that up until the 1950s many authorities on dress were of the opinion that clothing originated with a desire to decorate and ornament the human body. Thomas Carlyle set the tone when in 1833, in his book *Sartor Resartus*, he stated that 'The first purpose of Clothes... was not warmth or decency, but ornament' and for Carlyle, 'ornament' and 'decoration' were elementary pathways to the spiritual. (1) While there was considerable disagreement as to what exactly was meant by decoration and ornament all were agreed that dress was far removed from utilitarian functions such as protection.

Since the early 1960s a different conception of dress gradually displaced the earlier and rather tired triumvirate of causes, protection, modesty and decoration. This is the communication, or linguistic model of clothing, first articulated by the cultural critic Roland Barthes. Although Barthes effected a transformation in the way in which dress was understood, usefulness, in the guise of communication, remained at the heart of his radical reconstruction of human appearance. The *usefulness* of dress in the linguistic model resides in two areas. First, there is its ability to create and transmit information and meaning using the many objects and practices that shape human appearance. Communication is seen as, quite evidently, a useful process, something integral to social life. Secondly, there is the utility value carried by these social messages to the functioning of the collective as a whole. Barthes, following Durkheim, summarizes dressing and its messages as a way of enhancing what he called social solidarity.

Designating some element of the world as either useful or non-useful is to engage with a complex network of meanings and relationships. In addition to the structures of meaning carried by the dictionary there

lies the considerable elaboration of the two terms undertaken by critical thought. One such individual is the French philosopher Georges Bataille who explored the densely packed set of meanings residing in *useful*, *utility*, *usefulness* and their opposite, *non-utilitarian*. He elevated them into universal principles at work within human existence. Utility, he thought, served two broad ends. The first is the *production* (of value), which consists of *efficiency* and *accumulation*. Accompanying this is *preservation* and *survival*, be it at the level of an individual life or the existence of the collective. For Bataille, the non-utilitarian consisted of all those activities and objects that used up value with little or no regard for the principles of utility. Value was squandered not preserved. It was expended rather than accumulated. Although Bataille's interest was directed towards those large collective rituals such as the potlatch staged by the North West American Indians, as I hope to show later in this essay the principles of the non-utilitarian can be found to at work at the micro-level, for instance, within the folds and creases of a dress. Bataille argued that the non-utilitarian is the place where human beings are able to escape from the calculus of survival and functional servitude. Seeing the world as, primarily, a useful entity is to place oneself within a low-flying, but highly tenacious, ideology that imparts moral worth to all those qualities that are able to display their usefulness, but which at the same time disparages non-utilitarian values, objects and practices. (Critics of utility will often adopt the reverse position seeing in utility an example of mechanical soullessness.) *Useful* and *useless*, as can be seen by the negative weighting given to *useless*, are not neutral, descriptive categories but make up a duet of antagonistic forces where moral, political and existential options are at stake. As I hope to show, dress straddles both of these dimensions. However much our clothing may struggle, it is never able to become an absolute semiotic entity, a pure unit of information, nor is it able, with a few exceptions, one being women's hats, to fully transcend its utilitarian duties.

In three short essays published in the late 1950s, Roland Barthes undertook to bring about a revolution in how dress was to be studied and perhaps, even, how it was to be worn. (2) Drawing heavily on the methods

of structural linguistics and the Annales School of History he argued that clothing behaved in a manner similar to language; it was something the essence of which lay in the creation and transmission of meaning, that is, communication. Clothes were coded units that circulated within a group according to the rules of a collective and formalised system. But if clothes were units of meaning there also had to be a means of ‘reading’ them amongst the members of the group in question. This social dress code, together with its ‘dressers’ and ‘readers’, constituted what he called *the clothing system*. Clothing and body decorations in general were thought of as signs meant to be read. In Barthes’ view everything vestimentary is now subsumed beneath the semiotic gold standard of meaning.

Barthes’ model of dress-as-language was not just the result of a mechanical application of the principles of structural linguistics to the phenomena of dress. His critical encounters with what he called the ‘Anglo-Saxon psychologies’ were crucial to the formation of his notion of dress. As we mentioned at the commencement of this essay, these ‘Anglo-Saxons’ were a lineage of thinkers stretching from Thomas Carlyle in the nineteenth century through to the psychoanalyst John Flügel and the dress historian James Laver in the 1950s. (3) Barthes’ first target in his critical engagement with the ‘Anglo-Saxons’ was their long-standing desire to locate the origins of dress. Drawing on his familiarity with structural linguistics he dismissed this search for an origin, observing that, before dress, linguistics had been marred by ‘so much fruitless discussion on the origin of language’. The new way of studying dress proposed by him will save itself a great deal of time by staying clear of all concern with origins. If, despite all these warnings, one still wanted to talk about these *origins* then it will be found in the emergence of a collective, formal, system whereby substance and meaning are conjoined to produce meaningful signs.

Barthes was not only dismissive of the search for the origins of dress; he also brushed aside the rather vague psychological notion of ‘motive’ held by the ‘Anglo-Saxons’. A ‘motive’ was a sort of universal psychological disposition, urge or drive, lodged within each human being. Collective

entities derived their 'collectiveness' from the fact that they were the mathematical sum of individual wills, a kind of synchronised time-piece whose operations were guaranteed by the presence of an identical will-to-dress lodged within each individual. Barthes was arguing that dress is not just the material presence of the techniques of bodily transformation but also the organization of these material elements into a collective and ordered system. This is because of 'the tendency of every bodily covering to insert itself into an organised, formal, and normative system that is recognised by society.' (4)

For Barthes, dress cannot be explained by the psychological disposition (motive) of the individuals who make and/or wear it. Garments must be described in terms of their relation to other garments within the formalized, collective dress system. This tracery of internal relations consists of positive assertions such as 'I am', and negations such as 'I am not that'. Clothing and appearance are a system of threaded elements. For instance, the wearing of clothes that are coded for male and female, where each set of garments gains part of its meaning by the contrast it has with its opposite number. The full meaning of clothing cannot be accounted for simply by enumerating their physical properties. Dress must now 'Be explained, not in terms of aesthetic forms or psychological motivation, but in terms of institution.' (5) Barthes claimed that by recasting clothing as a form of communication, all previous attempts to understand dress would have been rendered redundant. The fundamental semantic unit, the garment, or part thereof, undergoes a profound change as it shifts from being a material object with a distinctive set of physical characteristics to a unit of meaning (a sign) to be read. As Barthes says, clothes must now be described by their functions within the formal system rather than by their material substance or mechanical function. Garments, and parts of clothing, make up messages to be read in relation to other vestimentary units rather than as symbols to be experienced, or forms to be encountered. For Barthes, it is pointless scrutinising the individual for something like a clothing gene. In place of individual 'motivations' he posits the existence of a collective, primary, formal system, which

constitutes an all-embracing field upon which meaning and clothes (signified and signifier) are brought together. Barthes agrees with Flügel that clothing is more about communication than expression.(6)

## Stuff and Gaps

One of the problems attendant on placing garments into neat, definitional boxes (for instance protection, modesty or communication) is that neither the category nor the garment seems to fit easily with one another. Only very rarely will clothing assume a form that is congruent with its designated use. For instance, defining dress as a form of communication raises the problem that there always appears to be more ‘stuff’ available than is required by the message. The utilitarian role of an object never completely justifies its form. The object always exceeds its instrumentality. Only on very rare occasions does the ‘useful’, that is the message, appear without being accompanied by the ‘useless’, or the excess. If, and when, communication takes place it seems oblivious to any law of semiotic economy. If there is more ‘stuff’, and there usually is, then *why* is there more? Is this ‘more’ just an insignificant, inessential off-cut that can be put to one side and ignored? There can be no doubt that clothes are used *for* communication; however, they do not appear to be fashioned *within* communication. If sending ‘social messages’ were their only aim then why do we not wear monochrome body stockings with badges emitting social messages about our position within the social order? Once again there is a sense that clothing has a logical, and even an empirical existence, prior to being drawn into the stream of meaning. The sociologist Fred Davis has forcefully criticised the linguistic model of dress along the following lines. (7) If our aim is to transmit messages and communicate via our clothing, why is it, argues Davis, that we don’t wear outfits that are efficient signallers rather than, as we so often do, wear garments that interfere with the clear transmission of information. For instance, why haven’t we adopted an ‘efficient’ form of dress such as the body stocking mentioned

earlier? If clothing exists under the sign of communication then surely one would see an improvement in the means by which meaning was secured. Better still, as Fred Davis has commented, if clothes are primarily about transmitting messages, then why don't their wearers simply use spoken language and so save a fortune on clothes bills, at the same time ensuring that the messages arrive in a clear and succinct form? To understand dress, let alone the communication theory of dress, means paying heed to the nature of this excess stuff that is an inevitable consequence of a utilitarian definition of clothing. There is always more stuff than we need.

Related to the criticism of 'too much stuff' is the criticism of 'gaps'. The gaps I have in mind are the pre-linguistic spaces that lie along the perimeter of the primary formal system which, it will be recalled, is the bedrock upon which clothing signs are produced. These gaps, or spaces, are part of a much wider logical problem with Barthes' linguistic model of clothing which would have dress come into existence prior to its insertion into the organized, formal and normative system which governs its meaning. This is the reason for my earlier comment that in Barthes' model clothing is not created *within* communication but is rather incorporated into a system of meaning *after* its material appearance. This pre-linguistic space is where clothes can have some kind of empirical and/or conceptual existence prior to their insertion into the system of organized communication. Two examples will suffice to reveal the nature of these spaces. The first occurs when Barthes describes the use of the *penula* (a type of hood) made by a Roman soldier.

The first Roman soldiers to throw a wool cover over their shoulders so as to protect themselves from the rain were performing an act of pure protection. (8)

And

If a woman places a flower in her hair this remains a fact of pure and simple adornment... as long as the positioning has not been dictated by a social group. (9)

In both these instances what is revealed is a space where ‘something happens’. Dress forms can, and do, emerge *before* they are swept up into the system of meaning. Barthes almost seems to be going back to the ‘Anglo-Saxons’ when he reaches for the principles of ‘protection’ and, in particular, ‘adornment’ to explain these pre-linguistic clothing events. But there still remains the question of what if anything is going on in these spaces. If it is ‘adornment’ then what form(s) does it take? I have in front of me a picture of a 1983 Yves St Laurent evening dress. It is a close-fitting, floor-length, black gown. The left shoulder is bare while a strap crosses the right shoulder. Roughly halfway across the strap there is a sudden eruption upward into a complicated three-dimensional rosette shape that brushes the cheek of the model. There is no question that the dress can, and does, become a communicable form. But what of the ornamental efflorescence taking place on the shoulder strap? Is it governed to the same extent by an imperative to ‘communicate’? If this flourish cannot be accounted for within a utilitarian definition then what forces are guiding the form taken by this ‘useless’ flowering? The gap and the stuff that appears within it may be variously called style, decoration and ornament. These are all similar routes taken by the ‘stuff’ that is surplus to the message. There is surely a link between the flourish on the St. Laurent gown and many of the principles that are at play in these pre-linguistic spaces where dress forms emerge before they are drawn into the system of organized communication.

Dress consists of material forms and is not just a ‘notice board’ upon which are attached two-dimensional signs. Allowing for the profound conceptual transformations in our understanding of clothing brought about by Barthes, it is still not possible to wholly subsume clothing under the banner of communication. Even at the centre of meaning-creation, where garment and sense are formed into a sign, there is the same logical difficulty of the garment apparently coming into existence before emerging as a sign. Again the garment seems to be in existence before it is incorporated into the communicative system. But form is not determined by meaning. The spread of the communicative field is never

wholly complete and in the peripheral spaces we have been examining, clothing can be many things other than a unit of information, or a potential message. Without disputing their role as information these pre-linguistic spaces are where other ways of being clothing can be found and where stuff is not simply a dead surplus, or an insignificant off-cut.

We have seen that the communication model of dress is not the total system it might wish to be. There are areas located beyond the useful. There are 'gaps' distributed at the edges of the primary formal system. It is within these 'gaps' that the *forms* of clothing first appear, only later to become units of information in the system of dress. This means that clothing and garments are polyvalent objects made up of utilitarian (communicative) elements and non-utilitarian forms. (I am leaving the description of the content of these non-utilitarian forms deliberately vague and will return to them in the second part of the essay.) I have suggested that what happens in these spaces may be thought of as *style*, *decoration* and *ornament*. These are all activities that strive towards ends other than those of utility. Let's return to the St. Laurent evening dress and in particular the ornamental flourish on the shoulder strap. As well as asking what it might mean, it seems perfectly legitimate to ask 'what is it?' and 'what is it doing?' One place where such questions about the ornamental and the decorative have been debated is in Evolutionary Biology, or Darwinism. In their attempt to understand a certain class of animal forms and appearances Biologists and Naturalists have argued over whether these features are the result of natural selection and therefore useful in ensuring/furthering the survival of the animal. Others have argued that they are evidence of other, non-utilitarian and non-adaptive forces at work in the natural world? If one views dress as not wholly utilitarian what, then, is the nature of the non-useful that underpins the ornamental flourish? This is similar to the question posed of animal appearances and it is to a consideration of their appearances that I will now turn.



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- (4) Barthes (2005), p. 7.
- (5) Barthes (2005), p. 7.
- (6) Barthes (2005), p. 33.
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## 2

### Hinge

In the previous chapter we were left with an ornamental flourish placed on the right hand shoulder strap of an evening dress. We are now leaving the realm of human dress for that of animal appearance. It is a move that at first sight would appear to usher us into a very different way of understanding (animal) appearance than was the case with humans. The question that immediately presents itself is ‘are the correspondences between human dress and animal appearance simply coincidental or are they symptomatic of a much deeper set of similarities?’

Science dominates our understanding of the relationship between the appearance of humans and animals. It insists that the two be kept strictly separate for fear of committing the sin of anthropomorphism. However, science is not the only way in which we think about the relationship between human and animal appearance. Our imaginations, in the form of metaphor and analogy, provide us with a rich storehouse of images that give substance to the similarities between animals and humans. Science may provide us with the causes of human and animal appearance while metaphor and analogy, more often, deal with the look of appearance. In an exhibition recently held in Sydney (2011) and devoted to Birds of Paradise, a strong theme running through the show was the similarities between the ‘ornamental’ feathers of the birds and our propensity to decorate ourselves in a comparable manner. This was reinforced in the Museum shop where feather-like hat decorations were on sale. The argument is not claiming that the Bird of Paradise is somehow the ancestor of the hat. Rather, it draws attention to the similarities in the ornamental forms of both of them. The two are the outcome of different causal chains but converge in the structure of their ornaments. Despite its claim to being purged of the poetic and the figurative, scientific discourse is steeped in metaphor and analogy. For example, take Darwin’s comments about the peacock’s tail: ‘the peacock with his long train appears more like a

dandy than a warrior'. (1) In Helena Cronin's study of Darwinism and sexual selection, *The Ant and the Peacock*, she uses 'fashion' to describe the emergence of a non-adaptive feature amongst a given animal population. The summer plumage of a male bird is described as 'its Sunday best', while the drab plumage of the peahen is referred to as 'sensible dress'. (2) Science, often the deflator of 'non-scientific' assertions, will tell us that the resemblances of analogy are not scientifically plausible and can only yield folk knowledge. On the other hand our imaginations find the correspondences between our appearance and those of animals to be a fruitful way of shaping our consanguinity with them.

At first sight animal and human appearance seem to be both different and distinct from one another. The appearance of animals is seen as fixed, something carried within, not on, the body. It is the result of pressures exerted by natural selection, in other words genetic in origin, and not susceptible to a change 'willed' by its carrier organism. Human appearance, while being universal – we all go about dressed in one form or another – is infinitely variable. It arises out of a common situation where humans have had to 'take responsibility' for their form and appearance. Adolf Portmann describes it so:

Our deficiency in instincts must be seen positively as a special freedom in direction, which distinguishes man in a decisive way from the norm of the higher animals. (3)

The universal drive to supplement the bodies we are given is not the result of genetic pressures, or other 'natural forces', but is rather an index of the cultural and social dimensions that are thought to differentiate us from the rest of nature. Alfred Wallace was of the opinion that the rise of human culture had led to the redirection of the forces of natural selection away from the physical body onto the newly arisen, culturally based forms of life. The forces of natural selection were not abolished but were responsible for 'improving' these products of human ingenuity. For instance, Wallace argued that by the invention and use of clothing Man was able to divert the pressures of natural selection away from his physical

body and onto the elements of his dress. It was the force of these pressures that led to Man's permanently changing external form and structure.

Wallace never drew back from his ultra-utilitarian position. For him, human clothes enhanced the chances of survival and 'improved' the extent to which they contributed to the organism's, and therefore the species', persistence. Those of a more culturalist bent argued that human appearance was not the outcome of natural selection but was rather the product of human ingenuity and imagination. Human appearance arises from a synthesis of the material appropriations taken from the external environment together with an ability to transform these materials into an appearance via the work of the imagination. The distinguishing characteristic of human appearance, as opposed to that of animals, is that human beings make an active contribution to how they look. Animals do not participate in how they look. They are bereft of subjective artifice.

Turning to animal appearance, we have seen that the most significant difference between humans and animals is that the former have ceaselessly amended what nature has given them. But in the case of animals their appearance is something that has been *given* to them by genetic inheritance via natural selection. The creature plays no part in the way it looks. What variability there is – and some species exhibit an extraordinary ability to change their appearance – rests upon the assumption that these variations are inherent morphological features over which the animal has no power. The changes in appearance are 'automatic', the result of a blind convergence between habitat and morphology. An animal's appearance is under the rule of natural selection and, hence, is explained by the extent to which it enhances the animal's prospects of survival and so guarantees that mating (reproduction) takes place. It pursues these ends by using its appearance in a multiplicity of ways such as warning, attraction, recognition and hiding, all of which serve the end of survival.

But the arguments over animal appearance, as important as they were, took in a much broader topic and that was the nature of the consciousness, or mentality, which accompanied it. In particular it was the manner in which Darwin formulated female mate-choice that ensured that sexual

selection would remain controversial up until the present day. (4) Attempts to ascribe mental qualities to animals, other than the most simple, were called ‘anthropomorphic’ and so ruled out of the picture. By suggesting that in female mate-choice a kind of aesthetic discrimination was present, Darwin breached the strict separation of human and animal consciousness. What, then, are the states of mind that accompany animal and human appearance? We have suggested that in the case of humans the most common explanation is a condition of ‘subjective artifice’ while for animals it is blind convergence. In the former it is thought that the mind enters into the construction of an appearance using material elements to produce an imagined appearance. With ‘blind convergence’ it is hard to see how the mind plays any part at all, or even if there is such a thing as mind, since appearance is a given ‘look’ and not subject to being read by its bearer. As we shall see in the next section subjective artifice and/or blind convergence produce very different descriptions of what is taking place within female mate-choice.

So far, it would seem that the differences between animal and human appearance far outweigh any similarities. However, the existence of the peacock’s tail and similar morphological features in countless other species opens up the comparison to factors that challenge the very foundations of natural selection. The peacock’s tail is an extravaganza, a flamboyant, bizarre, exaggerated, ornamental feature of apparently no earthly use to the bird other than the role it plays in its mating behaviour. Indeed, the tail may actually be damaging to its overburdened bearer. The problem personified by the peacock’s tail is why the male bird is possessed of a maladaptive feature that would seem to place it at a disadvantage in the struggle for survival. (5) Natural selection would have us believe that only those features that are advantageous to the individual are passed on to its offspring. If an organism carries a highly elaborate set of bodily ornaments and decorations, such as the disadvantageous fullness of the peacock’s tail, we must ask whether the morphological ornament in question is the result of forces other than those of natural selection and, by implication, cast doubt on the pervasive utilitarian view of nature. The terms ‘ornament’

and ‘decoration’, words used by Darwin and Wallace, suggest something that lies beyond the remit of usefulness.

This brings us back to the comparison at the heart of this section, namely ‘what is the relationship (if any) between the St. Laurent dress and the peacock’s tail?’ The most immediate similarity is to be found in a formal convergence in how they are described. Both object and animal are made up of a differentiated field divided into a part ruled by utility and one governed by the non–utilitarian. The latter is the home of decoration and ornament. In the case of animals, the difference between the two fields lies in those features of the male, which are the consequence of adaptive forces and those that are the result of maladaptive ones. This means that neither the object, nor the animal, is a unitary whole. At the heart of both of them we find a stark contrast between the areas governed by utility and the dimensions ruled by maladaptive, non-utilitarian principles. Once again, we encounter a dispute over a share, or remnant, of an object or animal, which exceeds its instrumentality. How is one to describe this ‘useless remnant’?

I want to end this section with a question. Is what we have described – the conjoining in objects and animals of two very different principles – simply a formal coincidence between animal and human appearance or are they indications of a deeper relationship that subsumes both orders?

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### 3

## Unnatural Selection

‘All this fish does is swim and eat and make little sharks’.

*Jaws* (Spielberg, 1972)

Darwin’s theory of evolution by natural selection set out to explain the morphology and the behaviour of an organism as the outcome of countless instances of favourable variations. Those organisms most fully adapted to their environment had a greater likelihood of surviving the struggle over scarce resources and eventually mating. The advantageous characteristics would be passed on to their offspring and in this way would gradually spread through a given population. After the publication of *The Origin of Species* (1859) criticisms started to be made of this first version of natural selection. How to explain the existence of those parts of an organism that appeared not to be the outcome of a lineage of advantageous, and therefore *useful*, variations? For instance, the decorative profusion of the peacock’s tail, or the exquisitely ornamented feathers of the Loddigesia humming bird of northern Peru, whose tail feathers would be at home on a Philip Treacy hat. Adherence to a strict interpretation of natural selection meant that animals, and in particular their appearances, were the way they were as a result of the cumulative effect of *useful* variations. Only those variations that increased the animal’s chances of survival were retained and passed on. The presence of these apparently maladaptive, or non-useful features, is even more puzzling because, according to the laws of natural selection, any maladaptive feature would be quickly eliminated because the animal who was the bearer of such a variation would be at a distinct disadvantage ‘in the struggle for existence’. In other words, the sole principle governing animal appearance, indeed the only principle governing the whole of nature was what Alfred Wallace called ‘the iron law of usefulness’. There must be a utilitarian explanation of these seemingly non-useful features, if only it could be found. To admit of any other principle would be to subscribe to a wholly different notion of nature.

There was, however, one important area of animal life where natural selection seemed to break down and that was the tendency (in general) for the males of a species to be more brightly decorated in comparison to the drab appearance of the females. Indeed, some of the more heavily ornamented animals were so overwhelmed by their decorations that it looked as if they were being placed at a distinct disadvantage in the struggle for survival. For instance, the complex plumage and detailed decoration of the male Argus pheasant (*argusianus argus*), which Darwin described as being ‘more like a work of art than of nature’. In the case of the Argus pheasant these ‘artistic’ characteristics would be symmetry of form, geometric precision of markings and regularity of colouring. The presence of such ‘artistic’, but maladaptive, features on the body of the pheasant begs the question of how they were able to circumvent nature’s gatekeeper, natural selection? In trying to understand the presence of these potentially maladaptive exceptions, Darwin formulated his theory of sexual selection, which he described in the following way.

The sexual struggle is of two kinds: in the one it is between individuals of the same sex, generally the males, in order to drive away or kill their rivals, the females remaining passive; while in the other, the struggle is likewise between individuals of the same sex, but in order to excite or charm those of the opposite sex, generally the females, who no longer remain passive, but select the more agreeable partners. (1)

Male-to-male combat by individuals of a common species leads to the development of bodily features (‘weapons’) that assist them in their struggle with other males. For instance, the greatly exaggerated mandibles of the *Lucanidae* beetle. Selection via female mate-choice favours, as in the case of the peacock, those males whose tails carry the most excessive ornaments and gaudiest decorations. ‘Male charm’ – as Darwin calls it – and female interest revolves around those individuals that display the largest, the most complex and the most colourful bodily features.

The theory of sexual selection had to explain two facts of the natural order. First, why was there sexual dimorphism; why were there different

bodily types for males and females? Second what was the meaning of these male and female differences? Why was it the male who generally exhibited the most extravagant appearance and complex courting behaviour?

These secondary sexual characteristics of the male, such as the peacock's tail, the song of the nightingale, or the horns of certain species of beetle are 'public' features that are meant to be apprehended by both the female and male of the species. Indeed, it is the appearance of these features at an appropriate time and place that triggers the sexual quadrille that is mating. The existence of these secondary sexual characteristics commonly referred to as 'ornamental' or 'decoration', are essential for male success in finding a mate (or being selected by the female). But continued selection for an 'ornamental' feature by the females may place the offspring that eventuates from such a union at a considerable selective disadvantage. The ornamental trait that plays such an important role in courtship may become so distended that the male offspring are placed in a precarious position in relation to the unsparing struggle to survive.

Despite the foundation provided by the laws of natural selection, Darwin was never able to fully convince himself that there was only one force bearing down on the inhabitants of the natural world. The very existence of the theory of sexual selection was, itself, evidence that he had been driven to concede that at least *two* forces, natural and sexual selection, were at work. Right from its inception, his theory of sexual selection divided opinion: between those who would deny the maladaptive, or non-utilitarian, status of male decorations and ornaments and wish to put the excesses of male morphology back into the camp of the useful such as Wallace; and others, including Darwin, who have argued for the existence of a quasi-aesthetic process of display on the part of the male and an aesthetic of appreciation and comparison on the part of the female. Mating is thought to take place within an erotic field consisting of maladaptive behaviours and morphologies. If the latter account is the case then something must be overriding the laws of natural selection.

Perhaps the most scandalous element of Darwin's theory of sexual selection was his explanation of those non-combative, secondary sexual

characteristics on the male body as being the result of female mate-choice. The female selects a mate who exhibits a number of non-adaptive, ornamental features with the result that over time the accumulation of these selections produces a highly decorated body rather than a 'survival' body. It is an incremental aesthetic. (Darwin had already encountered the aestheticized animal body while studying the breeding of fancy pigeons. J. H. Eaton, his friend and master pigeon breeder, remarked 'Fanciers do not and will not admire a medium standard for pigeons, that is, half-and-half, which is neither 'here nor there', but admire extremes'. Selection for a trait over a number of generations will lead to the extreme so admired by pigeon fanciers. [2]) This female choice from amongst the presenting males is made on aesthetic grounds rather than on those for survival. If this is the case, then the females must be equipped with something resembling an aesthetic sensibility and are able to discriminate between the various 'spectacles' offered by both the bodies and courting rituals of individual males. Darwin refers to this faculty as 'the aesthetic capacity of the females' and adds that 'these females appreciate the beauty of their suitors'. (3) At the heart of animal sexual activity is something that sits in stark contrast to the severe assertions of natural selection and its economy of effort and form. Female aesthetic appreciation is matched by 'male charm'. While the aim is to mate successfully, to do so often requires that the parties involved, or at least the male partner, get to this goal by the most circuitous of routes.

Another indigestible proposition contained within the theory of sexual selection is that a discriminatory faculty, lodged in the females, is 'guiding' the morphological changes of the male. Female-mate choice is selecting for certain aesthetic body features (and behaviours) that are not participants in the struggle for survival. This runs counter to the process of blind, mechanical convergence propelled by natural selection. (It is the admittance of a form of *subjective artifice* into the determination of appearance.) Indeed, what emerges is a space not that dissimilar to those ornaments adorning dress. The decorated male with his maladaptive ornaments and the ornamental rosette of the St. Laurent dress occur within

a space where it is possible to override the forces of natural selection, and of utility. Darwin draws attention to how this manifests itself with respect to Long-tailed ducks:

Even well-armed males, who, it might have been thought, would have altogether depended for success on the law-of-battles, are in most cases highly ornamented; and their ornaments have been acquired at the expense of some loss of power. In other cases, ornaments have been acquired at the cost of increased risk from birds and beasts of prey. (4)

If one accepts the theory of sexual selection, then one must accept the fact that not all selection is adaptive. And if not all variation is working to enhance the creature's survival, are the 'non-useful' elements to be simply eliminated or can they be deployed in other areas of the animal's life?

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- (3) Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, p. 466.
- (4) Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, Chapter 14, 'Birds – continued', p.473.



## 4

### Sexual Selection and Ornament

As we have seen, ever since Darwin and Wallace, scientists have used the terms ‘ornament’ and ‘decoration’, often uncritically, as a way of providing themselves with a foundation upon which they could conduct their comparisons of animal forms. However, ‘ornament’ and ‘decoration’ have complex semantic histories that make them more than just straightforward descriptive categories. If you make use of them, then certain repercussions will follow.

A useful way of describing ornament and decoration is as being made up of a *relationship* and an *event*. As a *relationship*, they are something added to a pre-existing entity with the aim of enhancing its form and appearance. The intensity of adherence to its host ranges from temporary residence through to that of permanent stay. To *decorate* refers to the addition of beautifying materials that may be easily removed. *Ornament*, on the other hand, suggests the shifting of the whole object into a coherent register of materials and motifs for a prolonged, or even, permanent length of time. The *event* of ornament happens within a space where non-utilitarian imperatives hold sway. Ornament does not obey the law of economy of form and so there will always be a sharp contrast between the ‘plain’, ‘essential’, ‘functional’, utilitarian survival machine and the ornamental additions that go toward the improvement of the form, or appearance, of the host.

It is here that the similarities between the utilitarian explanations of dress and the theory of natural selection begin to appear. In both instances, there is the familiar problem of there always being more ‘stuff’ than is required by a particular use or function. This excess, its name, its nature and its destination, is governed by considerations other than communication in the case of human dress and survival in the case of animals. This means that the object (garment) and the animal straddle two differential fields where different orders/principles are in play. In both dress and animal appearance, that which is in excess to utility is named

decoration or ornament.

The bodily features of the male are, in many ways, quite opaque and not susceptible to an immediate understanding. Ornaments and decorations are features that are additions to the 'standard model' and they arrive, or appear to arrive, later than the fundamental form of the animal to which they are attached. Darwin suggests just such a thing when he says that 'the male organism undergoes modifications' as if a more fundamental creature were residing beneath its decorated form. (Would that form be close to the plain, undecorated female? Wallace mounted an argument that the austere appearance of female birds was due to the greater pressures on them from predators during the hatching of their eggs.) I will discuss the importance of this contrast in a moment. One thing that is known for certain about the male ornaments is that they are there to display the males' sexual attractiveness. However, it would be a mistake to see this simply as an act of communication conducted by a 'signaller' removed from the content of the message. As well as displaying sexual readiness, the male is enacting his own sexuality and not just communicating it. What is shown, and what is done, takes place for his pleasure as well as for the female. What is not clear is why male sexuality (and female arousal) congregates around the ornamental form. Why is it that sexual exchanges are conducted only through those areas of the body that are deemed 'decorative? Why are sex and the essential form of the animal so antithetically disposed to one another? Their form, their shape, their colour, etc., are organised so as to both please and arouse the female. The bodily forms and colours are not random but occur in accordance with a set of aesthetic imperatives. (This aesthetic is not that of humans but is nevertheless possessed of a set of ordering principles that set it aside from an arbitrary distribution of characteristics.) Why such forms give sexual pleasure as against any other areas of the body remains unknown, even to Darwin. As he observes:

The senses of Man and of the lower animals seem to be so constituted that brilliant colours and certain forms... give pleasure and are called beautiful; but why this should be so we know not. (1)



At a certain point in any meditation upon the nature of ornament one seems to come up against an explanatory impasse. Claims that ornament beautifies, or in some way enhances and elevates its host, yield little in the way of clarity of explanation. How it does this or why it does this remains a puzzle.

For most of his working life Darwin remained in two minds as to how the nature of animal aesthetics should be approached. As we saw earlier, at a certain point he drew a line under his investigations accompanied by a firm 'we don't know'. While a deal of attention has been given to how *sexual selection* is carried out, relatively little attention has been given to the nature of the forms through which this process is conducted. If these ornaments and decorations are more than simple signals, then what are they?

The most common way of explaining what is happening is to see the whole process of male/female sexual exchanges as being governed by instinct. It is not an arbitrary instinct but one that has been guided by natural selection. The female selects as her mate the male who exhibits what Darwin calls the 'most charming' bodily features. However, this is not a conscious choice utilising some form of aesthetic discrimination, but a set of instinctual triggers. The females do not 'read' the male decorations, they simply react physiologically to a given pattern of forms, lines and colours, which they instinctively 'recognise'. They have no choice over which features are favoured and embedded in their bodies. They are the way they are because of the accumulated effects of a succession of female choices. The female and male are hard-wired to do what they do and there is no intervention in the process by either party. There is no real explanation why the sexualised parts of the male body are the way they are. There is only the automatic arousal by the sight of these specific forms. The whole process resembles a blind convergence of a lock with a key.

An alternative explanation insists that the ornaments and decorations so characteristic of male animals are organised as *aesthetic forms* whose main task is to 'charm' the females. This means that they are ornamented and decorated in accordance with the aesthetic principles the females exercise

in choosing their mate. (These *aesthetic principles* are, of course, inherited by the female. While the *capacity* constitutes the inherited ground, it is the *exercising* of this capacity that enables the female to discriminate between different males.) At once, the males are placed at the centre of a clash between the selective pressures of survival and the demands of the mating game. Male appearance is organised to be seen by a female who is capable of exercising aesthetic discrimination when it comes to choosing a mate. It is this persistence of a 'taste' over generations of mate-choice that leads to the gradual exaggeration of the ornaments and decorations that the females find sexually attractive. It is argued that female 'taste' will always choose the male who displays the largest, gaudiest or elaborate appearance. If one believes that the theory of sexual selection is a correct account of male and female sexual exchanges then it opens up a very different view of nature than that proposed by a strict interpretation of natural selection. Something enters the utilitarian universe and casts a shadow over its guiding principle.

It seems to me that there is another level to the 'work' carried out by ornament in the context of natural selection and this is the role it plays in sexual activity. So often the showing of ornaments on the male body is accompanied by violent emotions such as sexual delirium, ecstasy, frenzy and what one might call existential elevation. In order to understand male ornaments and decorations it is necessary that they be seen not in isolation but in relation to their opposites, the utilitarian, or the adaptive. The two dimensions do not rest beside one another, each oblivious of what the other thinks and does. For instance, there is often a strong contrast between the orders of the useful and non-useful in which the latter exhibits a number of formal properties that are not just different to those of the useful but are in contradistinction to it. For instance, the aesthetic organization of certain male birds of paradise exhibit a profusion and complexity of plumage and behaviour that is the exact opposite of the restrained appearance of the female of the species.

Georges Bataille has argued that what we might call the attractiveness of ornamentation lies in the degree that it encroaches on the useful

part of the host object, transforming the utilitarian dimension into the ornamental. With respect to the status of a church building he observes:

From the start the purpose of the edifice withdraws it from public utility. And this first movement is accentuated in a profusion of useless ornaments. For the construction of a church is not a profitable use of the available labour, but rather its consumption, the destruction of its utility. (2)

To put it even more strongly, one might say that it is a characteristic of the non-utilitarian to overtly display the properties of the utilitarian undergoing destruction. The male animal exhibits, or enacts, the obliteration of its form-as-utility into the freedom of the non-utilitarian. Darwin's description of the courting behaviour of the Blackcock (*tetrao tetrix*) is a wonderful example of the total transformation that can happen as a creature moves from the utilitarian to the non-utilitarian zone:

...the bird utters almost continuously the strangest noises: he holds his tail up and spreads it out like a fan, he lifts up his head and neck with all its feathers erect, and stretches his wings from his body... During these movements he beats his wings and turns round and round. The more ardent he grows the more lively he becomes, until at last the bird appears like frantic creature. (3)

The male enacts the destruction of utility and in so doing elevates himself above the commonplace. While it is the male that seems to occupy the lion's share of this transformation, Elizabeth Grosz makes an important point with regard to the female:

Not only are organs on display engorged, intensified, puffed up, but the organs that perceive them – eyes, ears, nose – are also filled with intensity, resonating with colours, sounds, smells, shapes, rhythms. (4)

This vivid description of the feminine correlative to masculine ornamentation requires a degree of limitation. There are a significant number of species where the division of sexual labour is reversed and the female is the decorated one. But even more common are the actions of

some females during the mating display. Several males may be competing for one female who will often slip away with one of the less striking males. Indeed, the mating game appears to have some striking similarities no matter what species one belongs to.

But for the most part, eroticism itself has become ornamental having been elaborated way beyond the simple requirements of mating and fertilisation. This ornamental eroticism engulfs the males and the females in sexual frenzy and propels them away from the mundane worlds of use and function. Maybe what is happening here is an overcoming of the necessities of survival, perhaps even of the laws of natural selection themselves.

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## Adolf Portmann

Darwin and Darwinism have always had their critics. Indeed, perhaps no equivalent scientific theory has attracted to itself so much venom and hatred in its rise from scientific scandal to scientific orthodoxy. Contemporary religious critics, particularly those originating from the evangelical churches in North America, have tried to displace Evolutionary Theory with a pseudo-scientific hybrid called Intelligent Design. Apart from being embraced by the faithful, Intelligent Design has had little, or no, effect upon Evolutionary biology. But there have been other, far less well-known, serious and informed critics of evolutionary theory, some of whom were professional biologists or fellow travellers sympathetic to science. I have chosen to examine the ideas of two such critics. The first, from biology, is the Swiss scientist Adolf Portmann (1897-1982), who spent a lifetime studying various aspects of animal life. His most pertinent publications are *Animal Forms and Patterns* (1952) and *Animals as Social Beings* (1962). The other critic is the French intellectual, Roger Caillois (1913-1978), who had a life-long interest in both the insect world as well as with the philosophy of science. His ideas about natural selection are to be found in *The Edge of Surrealism* (2003) and *The Mask of Medusa* (1964). Both men were unmoved by many of the basic assumptions of Darwinism. These two very different thinkers shared a philosophical disagreement over the nature of the 'nature' proposed by natural selection. They were reluctant to grant natural selection a position of dominance within the natural order. It had a place but not *the place*. Richard Dawkins' recent statement that 'natural selection can explain everything about life' is just the sort of triumphalist declaration that these internal critics of Darwinism put into question.

Adolf Portmann spent a lifetime studying a wide variety of animal morphologies and behaviours. What makes his work so relevant to the task underway here is his life-long unease with a biology that installed natural selection as the master explanation of nature. As we have seen,

Darwinism regarded an organism as an entity situated at the junction of a number of forces, namely finding food, locating sexual partners and avoiding dangerous enemies. It is these selective pressures that, through adaptation, work to increase the functional utility of the whole organism. It is a type of biology that makes *usefulness* into the fundamental explanation of nature. Within the forces listed above an organism has to survive and reproduce; the more 'adapted' they are to this 'place' the greater the chance they will survive and reproduce. Portmann allowed that forces aiding survival were operative in the natural world but he was convinced that to see an animal as just a bundle of utilitarian characteristics was short-sighted in the extreme. Nature was far more than this. His most general criticism of natural selection was an ideological one, damning it as the offspring of a social order that looks suspiciously like capitalism. Natural selection was dominant because it meshed with 'a form of civilization whose aims were seeking power over material things... and to change man's way of life towards greater productiveness'. (1) Despite the tenacity of these collectively held utilitarian beliefs there were other dimensions at work in nature that were not 'useful'. These Portmann labelled the 'non-functional' because they served ends other than those of survival. Once again we encounter the problem of what is to be done with the 'remnant' that remains after the object, or organism, has had a use designated to it. Portmann clearly understands this difficulty when he states that 'the functional form, rare and simple, is a special case'. (2) Such a perfect fit is uncommon while the most normal situation is one where the non-functional, in the form of the 'remnant', needs to be accounted for. Portmann was always uneasy about conceptually discarding whole areas of an animal's biosphere in order to remain compatible with a single guiding principle such as survival. At a general level Portmann's *non-functional* is not one thing but a panoply of dimensions, forces and drives that have ends other than those of survival.

One of the most striking repercussions of his interest in the non-functional dimensions of animal life is the way it changed his conception of the mental life of animals. He was convinced that they had an inner life

that was not just the product of a bundle of narrowly defined reflexes. This expanded notion of animal mentality could be described as a consciousness, which is creative in the world. My own favourite Portmannism is his finding, after a long period of study, that for some birds, songs served the function of passing the time rather than of urgent communication. Above and beyond the struggle for survival lay what he called 'a higher grade of differentiation', a realm in which animal forms and appearances partake of dimensions that are not ruled by the imperatives of use and efficiency. What he is advancing is a very broad picture of nature and animal life in which there are a considerable number of areas not governed by the laws of natural selection.

The difference between the Darwinians and Portmann is most striking in the way in which they understand the appearance of an animal. When viewed through the lens of natural selection, an animal's appearance is, above all else, the result of a chain of favourable variations that form an adaptive relationship with the animal's immediate environment. Survival is the great determinant of appearance. Portmann's way was quite different. His explanation of an animal's appearance did not rest on the cumulative consequences of an adaptive lineage. His explanation of animal appearance was grounded on the relations that existed between an appearance and the members of the same species, between different species and, finally, with the world around it. Bodily forms were coaxed from the organism by the composition of the immediate world in which it lived. At the heart of this conception of animal forms was the distinction between *an appearance* and *a sight* or put another way, the significance of the division present in all organisms into an inside and an outside:

The inside of an animal does remind us of really ingenious man-made apparatus, and a machine-like interpretation does explain some of its functions. But against this, the covering of such 'apparatus' always stimulates us to compare it with those kinds of artistic creations, which are farthest removed from any purposive conception. How often does it seem to us as if a roving fancy had been at work; sportiveness, the capricious free play of creative force, comes to mind rather than a technical necessity. (3)

That final list in the above quotation – roving fancy, sportiveness, free play of creative force – could only exist if there were complex mental states within which these qualities could flourish. Many examples could be taken from our world to confirm Portmann’s distinction between inside and outside, or between an appearance and a sight. Within the history of European clothing a similar division between inside and outside applied to undergarments. Until the second half of the twentieth century undergarments were designed as sights but not as appearances. Eventually they were transformed into appearances that were made to be seen by a beholder and whose forms were subject to the variations of fashion. I want to examine Portmann’s ideas about appearance later, but for the moment we need to sketch out his more general ideas about nature in the light of his criticisms of the prominence given to natural selection.

For Portmann, nature held within itself ways of being an animal that were neither the result of mutation nor of natural selection. Although quite different sorts of thinkers, Portmann and Caillois were firmly of the opinion that if nature were described simply as a machine for survival, then we would always fail to understand it. What is more, we would also misunderstand ourselves and remain trapped inside a utilitarian definition of what it is to be human. We would continue to be unsettled by the reverberations issuing from non-functional forces that we had disavowed in our scramble to be useful. Both Portmann and Caillois viewed nature as containing such non-functional forms and behaviours as ‘play’, taking pleasure in intoxication and vertigo (loss of self) and the existence of bodily forms that value complexity, sumptuousness and ornament over utility.

As we have seen, Portmann believed that every organism had to make an appearance in, and for, the world. By this he means that an organism will enter the world – make an appearance – within certain sensory wavelengths. For instance, birdsong will be a form of appearing along the pathway of sound and hearing. This *appearing* is not just becoming visible. To appear is to emerge with a form and a body surface that is organised to be looked at. One always appears in the eye of a beholder. Human beings,



at first naked sights become, as they dress, appearances. They are unique in the animal world in having an appearance that is infinitely variable, while it is only as a 'sight' that we are now genetically determined. An appearance is not blind like the organization of the organism's internal organs. Instead, being seen results in a form and surface that presents a 'definite and pleasing order' to the beholder of the creature. (This should really be supplemented with grotesque, ugly and repulsive.) This outer form is not simply a functional container ensuring the safety of the inner organs and aiding the survival of the animal; rather, it is an organ in its own right. As Portmann says, there

...is an intrinsic value to the visible and outside features of living things... they are arranged according to the law of symmetry, so that they appear in a definite and pleasing order. (4)

This means that the outer surface of a creature is to be grasped as a whole, as a gestalt, and not as a collection of units originating from an adaptive lineage or from a communicative chain. In this way, Portmann avoids the trap of the non-utilitarian remnant. The appearance of an animal – its gestalt – has a full presence in its here and now. Portmann concedes that there is an aesthetic (of some kind) at work in the specific details and overall patterns of an animal's appearance, but he ties this to the fundamental core of appearance which he names 'self-display'.

Wherever one turns in Portmann's work there are constant reminders that while the forces of natural selection are to be taken note of, they are by no means the whole story. In his idiosyncratic explanation of animal appearance he once again refuses to be confined by the laws of natural selection. As he asks:

Must we accept as totally inexplicable and unintelligible the many features in an animal's appearance which are removed from utilitarian interpretation? (5)

Perhaps nowhere in his work is the gap between the utilitarian and what he calls 'the land beyond survival' so wide as in his elaboration of the

notion of self-display or *Selbstdarstellung*.

Self-display, self-expression, or self-representation, is a consequence that all organisms have to pass through if, and when, they are to appear. They appear into the world in two ways. There is the ‘showing-off’ of an ornate and decorative surface – *an appearing for*. But there is also an *appearance as*. It is this second version of appearance that Portmann regards as the core of self-display. *Selbstdarstellung* is just that, the showing by the organism of its self. This notion of self-appearance or the manifestation of the self through one’s external look is not the easiest of Portmann’s ideas to understand. He sees ‘self-display’ as an innate urge held by all living things to present themselves to the world through their appearance. This innate impulse is no less compelling than the merely functional instincts gathered around preservation and survival. He quotes the Dutch scientist Buytendijk who named this dimension of appearance as the animal’s ‘displayed existential value’. Appearance is for the other but at the same time it is the coming into being of the self. The appearance of an organism is some kind of existential foundation. This urge to self-display is, argues Portmann, the appearance of the interiority of the animal on its exterior form and surface. And he explains what he means here through the example of the Radiolaria. Radiolaria are microscopic organisms floating in the world’s oceans. They have bodies made of silica that display beautiful shapes after the organism dies. He uses the notion of style as a way to explain what he is driving at:

Indeed, we seem to find in some of these creatures of the sea the characteristic style of special periods at which just such expressions of form were particularly appropriate to man’s inner attitude towards life. (6)

Portmann draws here on the German tradition of thinking about style. Working material into shapes, forms and patterns in particular ways (styles) that can both exhibit certain values and longings as well as embodying them. Style, consciously and unconsciously, rests on the ability of shaped material to embody complex ideas about the world and one’s self.

## Beyond Survival

Portmann never produced a comprehensive catalogue of what he called the ‘non-functional’ aspects of animal life and nature. Aesthetic discrimination, self-display, grief, ornament, deception, and play are just a few of the occupants of the land beyond survival. While each of them carried a positive content they almost always carried some form of criticism of the central position accorded to natural selection. His distaste for this utilitarian view of nature reached its highest point when he dismissed the idea that all the features of an animal were the way they were because of an adaptive drive propelling them towards an ever more efficient bodily form. Portmann argued, along lines not that dissimilar to the maladaptive consequences of female mate-choice, that such adaptive forms may go on to develop in directions ‘that may finally contribute to the extinction of the species’. Indeed, a profound *dys-functionality* may lie at the heart of nature, something as we shall see, that interested Roger Caillois and which echoed Sigmund Freud’s ideas about the death-drive. I want to conclude this section by drawing together some the themes already discussed and see how they relate to dress.

By placing appearance somewhere between survival and random event, Portmann established a place for appearance to unfold that was neither a reflex of a utilitarian desire nor the undecipherability of ‘blind’ meaninglessness. At the heart of his ontology of appearance lie the sensory forms of a creature’s body and the sensory experience by which these forms are apprehended. It was through this structural ‘situation’ that Portmann approached the comprehension of animal appearance rather than seeing it as the expression of genetic make up.

One of the major implications for dress can be found in the distinction he makes between *appearance-for* and *appearance-as*. Dress as *appearance-for* is dress defined by its communicative role and its relation to its beholder while dress as *appearance-as* imparts both form and identity to the body of the wearer. (The slightly archaic word *don* best captures the process of *appearance-as*.) For Portmann, the animal’s self-display has to be understood

as a gestalt, as something not made up of constituent units. In this way no part of an animal's appearance is surplus to requirements. There is never 'too much stuff'. Likewise, to treat dress as if it were a collection of units held together by the forces of survival, or communication, is to overlook the role of existential foundation that it plays in the present.

If we move to the outside, one of the most immediate of Portmann's ideas about animal appearance to impinge on our notions of dress is his belief that what appears on the outside of an organism is not primarily concerned with survival. The outer surface of the organism was more than the sum of those attributes that aided survival. Portmann never fully catalogued the nature of these 'something mores', perhaps because once one started to be more specific than the simple negative appellation of 'non-functional', there were just too many candidates to generalise about. One example will suffice. Earlier we mentioned that the direction taken by some species might finally contribute to its extinction. Such species deaths can be seen at work in human dress, albeit in the form of a staging rather than a biological demise. These are mock deaths and they are apparent in fetish costumes where there is an expulsion of the animate. Machined-surfaces displace all hints of the organic. The movements of flesh give way to a form of inertness as the organic substantiality is squeezed out of the wearer. Putting self-display to one side for the moment, many sorts of dress can act out non-functional scenarios. For example, the expenditure of resources on dress that rejoices in exceeding the limits of the 'sensible'. Loss of self can occur by being part of costumes that obliterate all trace of the wearer's body. I had an experience of this many years ago at a carnival held in London. The 'wearer' became a worm-like core with the 'costume' being propelled by a number of wheels attached to those points where the contraption touched the road.

Portmann concurs with the assertion that female mate-choice hinged upon the exercise of a kind of aesthetic discrimination. However, the aesthetic espoused by Portmann is not a grand ornamental flourish reserved for states of heightened sexual arousal, but is rather something present in the humblest of natural events. Here he is discussing the plumage of birds.

Which, at first, we consider to be of value as a warm, protective covering, is thus in addition so formed that its visible parts...build up a coloured garment, the intrinsic worth of which lies solely in its visible appearance. (7)

In other words the plumage of birds will exhibit an aesthetic 'face' because like all living things it will have to have a visible appearance. The implications of this for dress are clear. The aesthetic mode is not something alien to the pulse of the natural order, on the contrary, it can be seen wherever an appearance is made. Like the rest of nature we too have to appear. We too try to produce a 'definite and pleasing order'.

## References

- (1) Adolf Portmann, *Animal Forms and Patterns*, Faber, London, 1952. p. 202
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- (3) Adolf Portmann, *Animal Forms and Patterns*, pp. 34-35.
- (4) Adolf Portmann quoted in Hannah Arendt, op cit, pp 28-29.
- (5) Adolf Portmann, *Animal Forms and Patterns*, p. 210.
- (6) Adolf Portmann, *Animal Forms and Patterns*, p. 11.
- (7) Adolf Portmann quoted in Hannah Arendt, op cit. p.28.



## 6

### Roger Caillois

Like Adolf Portmann, the French intellectual Roger Caillois (1913-1978), had a complex relationship to Darwin and the theory of natural selection, one that swung from mistrustfulness to outright hostility. In the course of his critique of Darwinism he describes an extraordinary range of non-utilitarian forces, that is forces that were not subject to the rule of natural selection, that are at work in both in human life and in nature. His aim was to explore those realms of nature that Portmann had called 'the land beyond survival', but which he simply referred to as the 'non-utilitarian'. Everywhere he looked, be it at insects, birds, or human behaviour, he detected the presence of a multitude of forces such as intoxication, the aesthetic, an instinct for 'letting go', ornament and play, all of which have little or no relation to Darwinism's overarching goal of life, namely survival. The gap between Caillois' view of nature and that of the Darwinians can be shown with a simple example. We are all familiar with that cliché of wild life documentaries where juvenile members of the species are shown at play. Almost always, this activity is explained as something in which adult survival skills are being developed. Caillois, on the other hand, would insist that all playful activity be understood as a pleasurable end in itself and more likely to be connected to the forms of play practiced by adults in later life (see *Man, Play and Games*.) Caillois' inventory of non-utilitarian forces and drives provides a rich storehouse of candidates for extending our understanding of dress and, in particular, its relation to ornament, named by Caillois as one of the chief manifestations of the non-utilitarian. (Others examples of unproductive loss are luxury, mourning rites, wars, cults, games spectacles, rituals, sacrifices, the arts, etc.)

His broadest conception of nature rests on a particular understanding of how the orders of the human and the animal sit in relation to one another. This he describes so:

The point is not to explain certain puzzling facts observed in nature in terms of Man. On the contrary, it is to explain Man . . . in terms of the most general behavioural forms found widespread in nature throughout most species. (1)

While he is acutely aware of the dangers of anthropomorphism, which he defined as ‘The tendency to endow all beings and things with the feelings, emotions, reactions, cares, ambitions and so on appropriate to man’. (2) He was also suspicious of explanations that, frightened by the dangers thought to lurk in the anthropomorphic, isolated human life from the rest of nature. While man is not unique, the commonality that Caillois was aiming for lay beneath *both* human and animal appearance in drives, forms and structures that embrace both the order human and non-human. Once again, it is not a question of *if* there is a relationship between human and animal appearance but rather *what* kind of relationship it is.

Caillois’ conception of nature as something more than a gigantic process dominated by survival was bound, eventually, to bring him into collision with the theory of natural selection. It is difficult to gauge how closely Caillois had read Darwin and certainly many of his criticisms of Darwin and Darwinism are more appropriate to the arch-utilitarian Wallace than to Darwin himself. Caillois, like Portmann, doesn’t at first dismiss natural selection out of hand but rather makes it into one force acting among many. For instance, in regard to his special area of study, insect life, he observes that ‘In the case of insects, every worth while adaptation which has value over thousands of centuries is incorporated and preserved in the organism’. (3)

He recognises that this is different to the condition in which human beings are placed, where technical inventions such as ‘clothing, which is not part of the body’, make possible an open ended, ever variable, trajectory rather than the fixed ‘incorporations’ so characteristic of the insect world. Again, like Portmann, he rejects the total colonisation of nature by the theory of natural selection. This smouldering antipathy grew more intense, eventually culminating in Caillois’ (once again like Portmann) dismissal of Darwinism as nothing more than a pernicious ideology.



Hence it seems justified to break the framework predicated on the struggle for survival and natural selection. These mainsprings are too strictly and exclusively utilitarian . . . they stem from an ephemeral, local, and dated image mankind once had of itself under specific conditions. (4)

In each of the insect studies that make up his book *The Mask of Medusa* one finds a similar pattern to his argument. An analysis of the morphological peculiarities and bizarre behavioural patterns of his insect subjects is always followed by forthright criticisms of Darwinism. His examples have clearly drawn Caillois to them because they appear to violate the rules of natural selection. One insect that he paid particular attention to was the Praying Mantis and the paradoxes thrown up by the nature of its sexual behaviour. During mating the female devours the male, starting with the head. However, what followed seemed to Caillois to be a violation of the laws governing life and death. It was the ability of the male, after decapitation, to move through its immediate environment as if it were fully aware of its surround that led Caillois to place death, or 'the instinct for letting go', parallel with the forces of life. Death was inside of 'life' rather than an external visitor who arrives at the moment that life ceases. (5) His idea of nature as something that, amongst other things, 'pursues pleasure, luxury, exuberance, death and vertigo' as much as it does survival and conservation meant that his picture of nature was quite different to the one held by the Darwinians.

Caillois' vision of nature was both complex and various, but one theme remained with him throughout all of his work and that was the contrast, and interplay, between the 'utilitarian' and the 'non-utilitarian'. In his book *The Necessity of Mind*, written soon after leaving the Surrealists (1934), he put forward a philosophical grounding that would both support and organise his studies, not just of animals and plants, but human life as well. (6) At the heart of this lay a theory of the object.

It is obvious that the utilitarian role of an object never completely justifies its form, or to put it another way, that the object always exceeds its instrumentality. Thus it is possible to discover in each object an irrational residue... (7)

Just before this passage, he rejects the idea that there can ever be a 'perfect fit' between an object and its use, or as he puts it 'the perfect coincidence that rational thinking assumes them to have'. (8) There is always an excess to use and it is here, with what Caillois calls 'an irrational residue', that his ideas start to engage with those two 'residues' of dress that emerged in the critique of Barthes. First is the 'surplus of stuff' that lies beyond the requirements of communication. This corresponds to what Caillois designated as the portion of the object that is devoted to such 'futile' ends such as ornament. He also starts to suggest, with a great deal more specificity than we have seen so far, what exactly lies outside the utilitarian aspects of the object. For Caillois, the non-utilitarian consisted of a dazzling set of forces whose aims are quite distinct from those of survival and conservation. Human dress, because of its physical independence from the body of its wearer, can play a surrogacy role as a field across which the ripples of the non-utilitarian can play. It is to these domains that we must now turn.

Caillois was greatly influenced by his close friend George Batailles' division of human life into utilitarian and non-utilitarian spheres of existence while at the same time making some important changes to suit his studies of the natural world. Utilitarian and non-utilitarian were no longer restricted to human activities but extended out into the whole of nature. This re-organisation of the natural world meant that the non-utilitarian came to be applied to those morphologies and behaviours that ran counter to survival. The utilitarian became equated with those forces that aided survival and conservation together with their intellectual underpinning, the theory of natural selection. Darwin, and Darwinism, was *the* utilitarian principle against which Caillois' inventory of the non-utilitarian defined itself.

It is impossible to compile a complete inventory of the non-utilitarian forces explored by Caillois. The compilation of a total picture of the non-utilitarian was never his aim. However, in an essay written in 1970, *A New Plea for Diagonal Science*, Caillois provides us with two brief summaries of the non-functional:

This attitude prompts one to greatly vary the principles of biological explanation and to assert that nature (which is no miser) pursues pleasure, luxury, exuberance, and vertigo just as much as survival and natural selection. (9)

Later in the same essay he expands his list so:

The time has come to invoke 'motives' that are just as pressing on a universal scale, such as profusion, play, intoxication and even aesthetics, or at least the need for ornament and decoration. (10)

To which could be added sexual delirium and the instinct for letting go.

This list of non-utilitarian drives suggests many intriguing pathways into the study of dress. A single example will have to suffice. One axis of dress is a kind of spectrum of substantiality. Movement across this spectrum sees a variation in the wearer's 'weight'. At either extremity is something Caillois would immediately recognise, the loss of self. A good example of the 'heavy' end can be found in a photograph Annie Liebowitz took of the performance artist, Leigh Bowery, dressed in a hyper fetish ensemble. All signs of animation seem to have drained away as the heavy figure moves into darkness and death of a shadowy corner. This mimics one of Caillois's favourite figures, the insect which, with its impulse to merge with its immediate environment, becomes inanimate. In the other direction lies the aspiration for personal transcendence: as the moment of evaporation of the self and the body gets closer so the garments become ever more flowing and 'light', indifferent to the physique of their wearer. In the Christian tradition the completed stage of transcendence finds the blessed 'dressed' in light. While many of the forces listed by Caillois are relevant to an understanding of dress, the most pertinent for the present discussion are aesthetics, ornament and decoration.

Caillois makes two references to ornament. The first is, 'The time has come to invoke "motives" that are just as pressing on a universal scale, such as profusion, play, ivresse, and even aesthetics, or at least the need for

ornament and decoration.’ (11) The second occasion is, ‘The development of nature is predicated not on the principle of the survival of the fittest but on something like ornament and the pleasure, exuberance and vertigo it can cause’. (13) Neither of these observations have anything other than the widest of contexts with which to interpret them. Caillois never conducted any specific studies of ornament, but his alignment of it with comparable drives establishes it as something beyond useful. What is common to them all is that they are concerned with how matter (organic or otherwise) is organized and shaped primarily to be looked at, not through the lens of survival but through the lens of aesthetic finality. The patterns on butterfly wings leads him to argue that they exist in the way they do neither as a result of chance nor as the outcome of the imperative of survival. They are manifestations of a ‘butterfly aesthetic’. Caillois seems to be offering something close to Portmann’s notion of the aesthetics of appearing. To exist is to appear. But this ‘need’ of ornament seems to be a sort of ‘clothing’ in which everything has to appear. Ornament and decoration, in this sense, are compulsory. Aesthetics, but especially ornament and decoration, are participants in the constitution of organic form as well as being resident in the heart of human dress. This primary appearance, in which little or no regard is paid to survival, derives from Caillois’s belief that at the centre of nature lies an immense squandering of resources and it was this primary squandering that ensured an ornamented Nature. It is something we, as a species, have striven to achieve in our permanently *dressed* condition. (Note- by ‘dressed’ I mean the universal human condition of ‘stuff’ or ‘marks’ being added to the body to both ‘elevate’ and ‘complete’ it.) For Caillois, the ‘need’ for ornament by all living creatures is, perhaps, one of the most fundamental manifestations of the non-utilitarian there is. Recalling his other observation on ornament and decoration:

The development of nature is predicated not on the principle of the survival of the fittest but on something like ornament and the pleasure, exuberance and vertigo it can cause. (13)

The ornament envisaged here is not simply the universal ‘clothing’ à la Portmann but an active principle capable of inducing intense forms of pleasurable loss and excess. There are two possibilities for this kind of ornament. Proximity to it can induce these sorts of pleasurable meltdowns or it can be a series of existential states that come from being-as-an-ornament. One place where this may be seen is in the visual spectacle of fashion. The images of models (overwhelmingly female) wearing garments and/or their appearance in cosmetic and perfume advertisements often display facial expressions that run the gamut of such states as sexual delirium, swooning, beatific fulfilment, etc. This would correspond to Caillois’ notion that ornament – here clothing and other supplements – is capable of infecting the moods of those wearing them. This seems to be another form of surrogacy in which potentially dangerous states can be performed in the safety of the images. The pleasure and vertigo Caillois claims for ornament comes, I think, from the excitement produced by the sacrificial destruction of utility that so often accompanies its most intense forms. The pleasure created by ornament need not be limited to grand gestures of expenditure. Human dress, as we have seen, is not merely a useful, or communicative, ensemble but has a dimension that engages in ‘pure and simple dissipation’, something like a miniature version of the grand squandering at the heart of nature. Within dress of all kinds one can find ‘stuff’ being diverted to ornament such as the one on the St. Laurent dress and it is these small destructions of utility that are so often the source of a garment’s attraction.

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- (2) Roger Caillois, *The Mask of Medusa*, London, Victor Gollancz, 1964, p.16.
- (3) Roger Caillois, *The Mask of Medusa*, p. 125.
- (4) Roger Caillois, *The Edge of Surrealism*, p. 346.
- (5) See Roger Caillois, *The Edge of Surrealism* see ‘The Praying Mantis’, pp

66-81 and 'Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia', pp 89-103.

(6) Roger Caillois, *The Necessity of Mind*, Lapis Press, Venice CA, 1990.

(7) Roger Caillois, *The Necessity of Mind*, p.6.

(8) Roger Caillois, *The Necessity of Mind*, p. 6.

(9) Roger Caillois, 'A New Plea for Diagonal Science', in *The Edge of Surrealism*, p. 346.

(10) Roger Caillois, 'A New Plea for Diagonal Science', in *The Edge of Surrealism*, p. 346.

(11) Roger Caillois, *The Edge of Surrealism*, p. 346.

(12) Roger Caillois, *The Edge of Surrealism*, p. 337- 347.

(13) Roger Caillois, *The Edge of Surrealism*, p. 346.

## Conclusion

We began this journey with a few, inconsequential, scraps of ‘stuff’ and some ‘places’ found on the margins of a communicative field that was the garment. It was only when these ‘left-overs’ were introduced to Darwin’s notion of sexual selection, and the controversies that surround it even to this day, that the object of vestimentary communication began to acquire a new form. At the centre of the theory of sexual selection and the revised understanding of the garment ‘surplus’, was the idea of the non-utilitarian. If we use Caillois’s broad notion of ‘life’, the non-utilitarian can be traced through both human activity and animal forms and behaviours. Ornament and decoration are markers of worlds run on very different lines to that of use and function. The *ornaments* and *decorations* Darwin ascribes to the creatures of the natural world appear to run counter to the necessities of survival, while the ‘expenditures’ practised by us are not the result of rational calculation but activities able to satisfy some of our deepest longings. Darwin’s ‘ornaments and decorations’ mark the realm beyond the demands of survival while many of the additions and adjustments human beings make to their bodies are indications that we are about to enter a world where the rules of the mundane give way to the demands of those elevated states examined here.

The German philosopher of dress, Georg Simmel, equated the volume and extent of an individual’s ‘adornments’ with what he called an ‘intensification of being’. The males of the species examined here undergo an intensification of their being during the mating season and the indications of this are to be found in the ways in which their ‘ornaments’ are switched on. Likewise, the females experience this intensity, by and large, as an internal condition rather than through the appearance of bodily features. Ornaments in human beings outcrop when being is intensified to the point where it is no longer sustainable within the limits of the ‘useful’. Something similar to the ornamental flourish found on the St. Laurent evening dress emerges perhaps.





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